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“God” by Isaac Rosenberg Analysis

As a veteran of the brutish combat of the Western Front during the First World War, Isaac Rosenberg became known for his rather stark and grotesque images of war in his poetry. The poem “God,” which he composed during his service in the British Army in the trenches of the Western Front, gives clear evidence to this notion. This free-verse poem reflects the growing discomfort many soldiers faced in believing in a compassionate and loving God, as it recounts the appalling scene of a dead soldier, who is subservient to the “bullying hulk” that is God. Rosenberg makes this poem both unique and awing through his: negative and brutal diction, death connotations, and anti-religious tone throughout the text.

The poem is characterized by an almost exclusive use of words that imply some form of suffering, whether through pain, death, or inhumane conditions. The phrases “malodorous brain” and “slugs and mire,” (1) cause the poem to open immediately with an image of decomposition and death, which reflect the true nature of the Great War. Death also is directly mentioned in places aside from these phrases, such as “to make death more hard” (12) and “you die to sell.” (15) It is obvious from these phrases that Rosenberg encountered unimaginable horrors in the trenches of the Western Front, and it can be assumed that these incidents traumatized his mind to write these epic and somber poems. The negativity in war epics are usually implied, due to them having to do with a conflict involving death and destruction, which was found in unparalleled levels during the First World War. Rosenberg’s clear hatred for the war, which he ironically became famous for writing about, is extremely clear by the way he characterizes death and despair.

This despair is evidenced in the poem primarily through allusions to death and carnage, and it is suspected that the despair Rosenberg writes about is directly related to his World War I experiences. Also, the phrases like “crush them more” (7) and “take more pain” (13) are understood by the context of the poem to be referring to God’s role in the War. After suffering in the trenches with death, disease, and starvation, many soldiers in the British Army began to doubt the very existence of God. The shell-shock and despair of these soldiers, in addition to their newfound hatred of God, created an era that soon became known as “The Lost Generation.” In the poem, Rosenberg makes actually very few references to the war, and instead cites God himself as the reason for the inordinate amount of suffering the soldiers encounter.

This anti-religious fervor found in The Lost Generation is often declared the source of modern-day atheism and agnosticism, and it was only strengthened by the countless other global conflicts fought since then. In the poem, Rosenberg seems to be speaking from his own perspective when he ponders: “Who rests in God’s mean flattery now?” (11) This statement is open to several different interpretations, but a safe assumption to be made that it means God’s anger and hatred for the men he tortures. These words from Rosenberg are actually somewhat surprising considering his background of being raised in a Jewish household and growing up in a Christian-dominated nation. However, the effects of World War I were often drastic, and caused many of the men who fought in it to turn their backs to the figure they once worshiped. Rosenberg even goes as far as to say that he and his fellow Man are hiding from God in a place where they are “safe till he slinks in at dawn.” (18) The hatred of God the soldiers of the British Army displayed is emphasized even further in the phrase “miasma of a rotting God!” (29) This choice of words by Rosenberg indicates his belief that God is slowly dying and whatever feelings he still gives off are evil.

The poem “God” by Isaac Rosenberg gives a clear indication of the disparity felt by Rosenberg and his fellow soldiers through its: negative and somber diction, references to death, and anti-religious tone. While Rosenberg was obviously not the first person to give off anti-God tone in his work, he became known as one of the most famous of the Georgian Age, which served as a transitional period into modern day literature and poetry. At this point in time, despair was all these poets saw and knew because of the First World War, and so their poetry became extremely emotional and somber. This age of poetic history soon led to the abstractness and progressivism characterized by mid-20th Century literature and poetry.

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